

First Presbyterian Church
2 Kings 2:1-14, “Looking Godward”
By Pastor Matt Johnson, June 29th, 2025

Today’s text is about an important time of transition,
both at a personal level for Elijah and Elisha,
as well as at a spiritual level for the nation of Israel.

Throughout this text there are many references to the past
as well as consideration for what was yet to come.

Well, since I’m a total geek, it made me think of one of the
Roman gods by the name of Janus.



[SLIDE] With two faces, Janus was able to
look forward and backward
at the same time. He is known variously as the god of beginnings,
transitions, gates, and doorways.

Haven’t heard of Janus? The month of January is named after Janus
because it is where we move from the previous year to the next.

What a skill to be able to look forward and backward
while moving through life.

“Hindsight is 20/20?”

“Those who do not study the past are doomed to repeat it?”

“Eyes in the back of his head?”

Janus has all that wisdom and more packed into that double-size noggin.

Even though God thought it better for us just to have *one* face each,
it’s very natural for us to live with these dual perspectives.

A few weeks ago, I helped my friend Jeremy Richards and his family
pack up their home as they moved to Pennsylvania.

Jeremy was departing as the Chaplain at Linfield College
to a new call as a pastor.

Then there was a group of friends and colleagues helping out,
and this loading crew represented a look back
at the Richards' family's time in McMinnville:
people who played basketball with him on Fridays at Linfield,
a group who were regulars at Portland Timbers soccer games,
some who gathered to play cribbage.

At the same time, there was a good bit of looking forward –
A new community, new opportunities and challenges,
hope of finding beer in PA that could match
what we have here in Oregon.
(Of course the consensus was “no”.)

We're doing some of the same thing here
with our church's music program.
We look backward with appreciation at the leadership of Marcia Stratman,
while we also eagerly look forward to the arrival of Rebecca Wilson
and her unique personality, gifts, and approach.

Think about changes in your lifestyle,
changes in health, changes in finances,
changes in our families and friends, changes in culture.

With each of these, we naturally look backward and we look forward,
remembering what has happened in the past
wondering, hoping, dreaming of what comes next.

But is that all we've got?
I mean, do you look at Janus up here on this slide and say,
“yeah, I want to be like that”?

Yes, we used to do this or that,
but now we're heading toward here or there...what's missing? God.

[SLIDE] The life of faith consists in dislodging ourselves
from our accidental worship of Janus,
and remembering to look in another direction:
Godward, which is really no direction at all.

If we fail to look toward God in times of transition,
we may learn from the past,
and we may dream of a new future,
but we won't perceive the activity of the Spirit
which is in the here and now.

So...that's the sermon.

Now, with the sermon out of the way,
I take you through this beautifully crafted story
of Elijah and Elisha,
and you can watch for these orientations:
backward, forward, and godward.

When Elijah first met Elisha in 1 Kings chapter 19,
he went up to him while Elisha plowed his field,
and Elijah threw his cloak, or his mantle,
over Elisha's shoulders and just walked away.
[Godward]

Elisha stopped his plow, ran after Elijah,
and asked him to wait while he said goodbye to his parents
[backward →]

When he came back Elisha literally made a BBQ out of his plow,
grilled up his oxen, and after a massive feast
he set off as Elijah's servant. [← forward]

Which brings us to the story at hand.
As the story goes, the two prophets take a road trip
that begins at Gilgal and has three stops.

Each of these places—Bethel, Jericho and the Jordan River
are known to us because they are featured during
Israel's original entrance into the promised land.
At each stopping point Elijah asks Elisha to stay behind
because Yahweh, the LORD, has called him to another place.

The line, "God told me to," is either the best reason for doing something,
or the worst excuse for doing something.
There's really no middle ground.

“Honey, why did you buy that \$5,000 leather couch
without asking me?” Um...God told me to. Worst excuse.

“Why did you help that person get their car started when he
was super rude to you last week?” Well ... God told me to.
Best reason ever.

So Elijah says, “Yahweh has told me to go,” but Elisha thinks
“two can play at that game,” and at each point Elisha replies,
“Well as long as Yahweh’s alive and you are alive,
I’m not leaving you.”

Now, why does Elijah command Elisha to stay behind?
It makes me wonder. I wonder if it reflects Elijah’s own knowledge
that he will be taken away soon, and he doesn’t want
to drag out the inevitable separation
and the pain associated with it.

I also wonder if it’s a test of Elisha’s loyalty? Is he testing whether
Elisha is committed enough to stay to the end?
For whatever reason, three times the younger prophet
is told by his master to stay behind,
and three times he refuses.

Another group is brought into the story when they arrive
at their first destination, the city of Bethel:
the “company of the prophets.”

These prophets in training approach Elisha and say,
“Do you not know that today Yahweh
will take your master from you?” [← forward]

Elisha replies, “Yes, I know, so be quiet!”
Now we’ve got another piece of the puzzle—
we’re not the only one’s who know
what’s going to happen today.

Both these prophets in training and Elisha know what God is going to do.
But why does he silence them? Is he worried they will interfere?

They move on to another city,
this time the famous city of Jericho that was toppled
after Israel crossed the Jordan river
and entered the promised land.

Here, everything happens exactly as we've seen it before.
This repetition both builds the tension we've already observed
and establishes the pattern of interaction.
This is just like what we find in classic stories like
"Goldilocks and the Three Bears."

So by now we know exactly what to expect.
Elisha has predictably refused to leave Elijah,
and so they will go together down to the third place, the Jordan river
where they will be met by the company of the prophets
and they'll ask Elisha if he knows what's about to happen.

And sure enough, the two of them go down to the Jordan,
and in verse seven the prophets in training show up right on cue—
but then something different happens.

They don't approach Elisha to ask him a question,
but stand at a distance to see what happens.
The break in the pattern tells us something very important
is going to happen.

Elijah strikes the water of the Jordan river with his cloak—
the same one he once wrapped around Elisha. [backward →]

The Jordan river is famous as the boundary between the wandering Israelites
and the land God had promised them. [backward →]

When they came to the Jordan River,
the ark which held the ten commandments was carried in first,
and the water parted for them to cross on dry land.

So now, at time when Israel was lacking in faith,
and were spiritually "wandering in the desert,"
Elijah has struck this same Jordan river
with his rolled up cloak or mantle,

and the river parts to the left and to the right,
and they walk across on dry ground.
This is a massive sign that the Spirit of God is with this person,
and that a major transition is taking place.
This is a high order act of God that calls back
to some of the most pivotal events Israel's history.
Now the tone is set, and Elijah asks his follower,
"Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?"
Elisha replies, "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit."

We're talking here about inheritance—
what gets passed on from a parent to their children.
In ancient Hebrew culture, the firstborn
received a double portion of the inheritance.
So what Elisha is asking for is to be considered
as the first born son of Elijah with regard to his spiritual role
as a prophet of Yahweh, or the LORD.

In verse 10 Elijah says, **"You have asked a difficult thing,
yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours
otherwise, it will not."**

"If you see me."

If Elisha is too preoccupied with the things of the past —
his family, Israel's historical journey, the legacy of Elijah's ministry —
he will miss this moment.

He will also miss it if he is too consumed, as the company of prophets are,
with what will happen in the future
"Don't you know your master is being taken away?!?"

These are the two most common pitfalls
when God is leading us through a time of transition.
They aren't sins, but if we give them too much of ourselves,
they take consume our attention
and cause us to lose our balance.

To see Elijah as he is taken away, Elisha must look Godward.

Picture this final moment of the master and the disciple,
 “as they were walking along and talking together.”

Just then, the great moment arrives arrives:
 a chariot of fire and horses of fire appears
 and separates the two of them,
 and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.

When I was working on that Rich Mullins song, I remembered that
 I used to think the chorus was a joke.
 “When I leave I want to go out like Elijah.”

Now I hear something deeper.
 “If you lay me with my fathers or if my ashes scatter on the wind,
 I don’t care. When I leave I want to go out like Elijah.”

He’s going to die and be disposed of one way or another,
 but the particulars don’t matter.
 Rich wanted to live a Godward life and die a godward death,
 rather than consumed by the past or the future, by riches or poverty,
 by fame or obscurity.

In fact, at the peak of his career, Rich left the spotlight,
 put all his money into a trust
 which allowed him a very modest amount to live on,
 and moved to a Navajo reservation in New Mexico
 to teach children music.

He died in 1996 when he was hit by a drunk driver.
 I think he *did* go out like Elijah.

Going out like Elijah isn’t a flashy display of a person’s holiness,
 it’s attending to God so consistently
 that the transition from this life to the next
 is seamless and natural.

Each of us must ask ourselves, “Who do I give my attention to?”

I hear the same themes in the African American spiritual
 which came from this story:
 “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, comin’ for to carry me home.”

Even in slavery and suffering,
the community which crafted this song
attended to God's presence
and walked with their Savior so closely,
that they could hope to go out like Elijah.
"I'm sometimes up and sometimes down,
still my soul feels heavenly bound."
At the end the passage, Elisha is alone in a field, his garment torn two.

Did it happen?
Did he receive the double portion of Elijah's spirit?
Or is Elisha left alone in his grief
on the wrong side of the river?

Though Elijah is gone,
something fell off that fiery chariot—his cloak.
So Elisha takes up the cloak and goes back to the Jordan river.

He doesn't look backward. He doesn't look forward.
He looks godward:
"Where now is Yahweh, the God of Elijah?"

He strikes the water with the cloak,
and the river divided to the right and to the left,
and he crossed over.

[SUNG] The Jordan is waiting ... for me to cross through ...